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Sunday Sermon: “Coming Home”

Rev. Dr. Len De Roche

Sermon “Coming Home”

In the story to the children that Melissa and Dan told we have two ideas of home. Home which is a place and home which is an idea. Now the Wheelers and the Wilsons have made their home in West Hartford and this church is a lot of what that home means. I on the other hand have moved around all my life and I didn't give my children a place as a home, but home was wherever we were and for us finding home was to be part of a Unitarian or Universalist church. This was the story that Dan Melissa told. But the theme of fable, stories and myths and many true stories about finding real treasure at home are a part of every culture. In the great movie classic ET from the 70's, the Extra Terrestrial was constantly looking for a way to get home and the conclusion to the adventure was that ET got to go home. A generation earlier Dorothy's adventure in Oz was about her dream of home and all those emotional ties with home. It ends with the line “you could always go home if you just wished for it.”

A generation earlier the great jazz musician John Coltrane spent his twenties running in place. Early in life he had trouble finding his way, a narcotics habit

stifling his musical career. Then, at the age of thirty-three, something happened, and he underwent a spiritual conversion. He renounced drugs and alcohol and created his own quartet. Everyone who worked with him was impressed by his newfound conviction and dedication, both musically and professionally. Coltrane went on to record his masterpiece, *A Love Supreme*, after the music became for him a form of worship.

One of the earliest coming home stories that follows this theme is the story of the prodigal son. The parable that Jesus tells of a man with two sons. The youngest decided to take his legacy early. His father gives him his inheritance and the young man leaves. We know the youngest spends his birthright on foolish sensory pleasures. When he, as a Jew, hit bottom and realized he was living lower than the swine he was tending, he decided to go home and put himself at his father's mercy. When he arrives he is welcomed by his father saying: Quickly, bring out a robe—

the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.

Much of literature concerns itself with the coming home theme. Robert Frost's great poem, "The Death of the Hired Man" deals with this theme. In the poem a New England farmer's hired man returns to the farm as the

weather turns bad. In the poem the farmer's wife tells her husband why the hired man came back to their house saying, "As if she played unheard some tenderness that wrought on him beside her in the night. 'Warren,' she said, 'he has come home to die. You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.'" "Home," he mocked gently. "Yes what else but home? It all depends on what you mean by home. Of course he's nothing to us, any more than was the hound that came a stranger to us out of the woods worn upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." "I should have called it something you somehow haven't to deserve."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." This is the special feeling that is elicited by coming home, or the thought of coming home, or the promise of coming. Home is the place you can always go where you will be accepted for who you are.

You can bring your warts home, you can go unshaven at home, you are accepted for being as dysfunctional as you are. Part of the feeling of home is the security of being accepted as an imperfect human being without any airs or falsehoods. Like the prodigal son, we are accepted despite the errors we may make.

But home isn't always a source of treasure. There was once a small tribe named the Iks. This tribe of people

was formerly hunters and gathers in mountain hills of northern Uganda. Two disastrous events happened to the Iks. First, the government designated their area a national park and they were prohibited from their occupation as hunters and became farmers in a stationary location.

Secondly they were studied by an anthropologist who wrote a book about his experiences. The book portrayed the Iks as a disagreeable group of selfish people when the fabric of their society was overturned. In his description of his two

miserable years with the Iks, the researcher found the people were really solitary beings who because of reasons not their own were forced to live in a cramped village where they really did not enjoy any relationships with each other. They shared nothing. They never sang. They turned their children out to forage as soon as they could walk and abandoned their elderly. They would even defecate on each other's door step and they reveled in another's misfortune.

They were a mean society. The researcher's thesis became that there is a certain Iksness in the center of us all and that joy of civility is learned. His conclusion may be too generally the result of his two miserable years, and joy may have bred joy.

Part of this joy I would like to call being in right relationship with each other. We need to be open

enough with each other that our warts do not create resentment or ill feelings. This is a good start to being in right relationship with each other.

When I arrived in Bethlehem in 2002 as a new called minister, a section of the local paper had an article by the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, the Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall. The article was called “Boundaries must be drawn when a church hurts people.”

He talks with sadness of his recent decision to shutdown one of his churches, St. Michael’s in Birdsboro. He talks about the 11th Commandment of church to “be nice.” He says “there were several reasons for this painful decision. What was utterly unfixable was an ingrained pattern of conflict that caused the church to be known in its community as ‘the fighting church.’” He goes on to talk about “a line (that) had to be drawn: a church that harms people and will not see that it does so cannot be permitted to continue.” He points out that “every person who says, ‘if the church does this I’ll never contribute another cent’ must be told we will find a way to get by. Every person who says, if this happens I’ll quit the church must be told we will miss them.”

He concludes that “Churches (need) to be healthy enough to say to actively or passively aggressive bullies, ‘Change your behavior or you may not be part of this community.’” He is talking about right relationships. It was what didn’t occur in the Iks society.

I will take exception to one implied statement the Bishop may have been making. I believe disagreements have a positive effect. Certainly I would hope there will always be someone who will see a situation differently than I. As the Universalist

Hosea Ballou said, “If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.” This is right relationship.

Now I have been part of congregations that are like the Ilks. At one time one of the congregations that I was working with had the president and vice president of the congregation resign because of bad behavior by the congregational members. After they left, one member voiced the opinion that these two people didn't have thick enough skins to be in our governing body. In the culture of this congregation, this was true. Imagine if you will a congregation that that can make that statement. In my one year here I have found just the opposite. When you state love is the spirit, you really mean and you live it. Our touch of hand program with the mums this morning illustrates this love spirit. You will have disagreements, this is healthy, and you deal with it in the Universalist way of Hosea Ballou.

Today in Fellowships, Societies, Churches and Congregations of our association we celebrate coming back together at this ingathering as home. Symbolically many use water as we. Many have been away or have

had their adventure that we will hear about at coffee, now they are home, knowing when you have to come home, we have to take you in. It is where you are accepted no matter what you have done. This is one of the dynamics of our congregations. It is one of our blessings but it can also be one of our curses. I have heard it said that Unitarian Universalists can believe anything they want. This is not quite true. Our right of conscience means not that we can believe anything we want, but as it is often expressed, that we are free to believe what we must. I feel there is a significant difference between want and must. Want takes us on self-serving paths. Must takes us on a journey along the road of the responsible search for truth and meaning and the ethical actions that come from these truths. This is not the whole of it either.

One of the tensions in Unitarian Universalism communities is between individuality and community. This occurs as well within our homes in recognizing the essential role of the individual. This calls us to honor this essential role of community. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote,

“Only if a person truly belongs to a community, naturally and unselfconsciously, can one enter into the living stream and lead a full, creative, spontaneous life, at home, in the world and at one with self and one’s fellows.”

There is a glue that calls us to home that also calls us

into religious community. This is to allow us to be imperfect individuals and that wills us to sacrifice some of our individualism for the opportunity to be together as a community. This is more than tolerance but a respect for each other's views and beliefs so as to honor each others journeys. If it didn't we would be like the Iks. This, I feel, is why we cannot believe as we want but as we must.

When someone asks me what do Unitarian Universalists believe? I will know how to answer. I will be able to say: "Ours is a covenantal church. Individual members believe many things, but we are in trust together to walk together in mutual respect and love, encouraging one another's spiritual growth and responsible search for truth.

Together we seek justice for a community bigger than ourselves." Today we blended our waters and our stories and in doing so we commit once again to sharing ourselves with our community, to strengthen the community and our individual selves, so this Church will be the place where, when you go here, we not only have to take you in, but want to take you in. Said simple by a Transylvanian Unitarian, Francis David, 500 years ago. "We need not believe alike to love alike."

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen

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